The "Black Hand" at Tony's

By GEORGE F. BUTLER and HERBERT ILSLEY

Dr. Furnivall in the Solution of a Perplexing Case.

ON the 12th of July at two o'clock in the morning "Little Italy" was startled by a sound that sent its constituent parts tumbling out of bed and scampering about as if demented. It was the report of an explosion, like that of a gun discharged suddenly in the silence of the night. While women in nightclothes ran wildly here and there, squalling babies in arms, and men nearly naked vociferated excitedly and rushed for weapons, three things happened in front of No. 110 with the suddenness of a flash of lightning. A first-floor window vomited a policeman to the sidewalk, the door flew open disclosing another policeman in the entry, and the near-by alley emitted a breathless third. Meeting at the foot of the stairway, these three officers regarded each other blankly.

"He took the stairs—where is he, Murphy?" gasped the one who had come by way of the window.

"Man, I tell you I saw him!" contradicted Finnegan. "He banged open Tony's door and hit the landing in two jumps and down he went. I was looking right at him. And I heard him on the stairs. He was in his stocking feet, by the sound."

"I heard sounds all right, and that's why I opened the door—to let the light in from the street lamp so I could see. But nobody showed up."

Detective Birsch said nothing, but if the darkness had been less dense they would have seen that his face was set and grim. In the hall a thin line of light ran beneath a door, from behind which came sounds of sobbing and moaning, and entering without ceremony they beheld, through little wreaths of smoke, a woman sitting on a bed, holding in her arms a young fellow down whose face the blood streamed, and a man on his knees in the middle of the floor praying vehemently with uplifted hands.

"Tony," he said then to the praying man sharply, "anybody but him injured?" motioning towards the bed.

"None-a bud da boy," he answered, and in the same breath continued his screaming supplications.

"Good boy!" he said encouragingly. "You've got the right stuff in your inside. It takes more than a little thing like this to knock you out, hey! Now, tell us about it."

"I don't think I know much," the boy returned in a weak voice, but in good English. "I woke up and saw somebody outside my room on the fire-escape, and I asked who was there. Then something struck me on the head. I heard a big roar, and I suppose I fell out of bed, for when I came to myself my mother was dragging me across the floor."

"Well, but say!" cried the astonished detective, "the window was closed and locked, wasn't it, as I found it just now? How could anybody throw a bomb through it without breaking the glass? It ain't broken, and it was fastened when I went to put it up."

"It is strange," said the youth. "Besides, father and mother heard somebody hurry across this room, open the door and shut it, and then run downstairs."

The detective looked inquiringly at the woman, who nodded.

"We heard-a da one," she said, in the midst of her moaning. "He make-a da feet on da floor, on da floor, an' make-a da door go bang. We hear for sure."

Detective Birsch started suddenly into the next room, the sleeping quarters of the parents, and the living-room of the family as well. On the way he raised the praying little Italian by the collar, and, carrying him along, deposited him on a chair. Then carefully closing the connecting door he gazed sternly at the frightened countenance of the man who in the neighborhood was known as Tony the Barber.

"Look here," he said, with all the weight he could put into his manner, "didn't I say you mustn't let a living soul know you had received a letter from the Black Hand? Yet here you go and tell it—"

"Non, non, I no tal-a!" the Italian interrupted. "You tal-a me no tal-a anybod'. I tal-a nobod', for sure. Da boy he ask for why I clos' da wind' sosh da hot night. I no tal-a da boy. I tal-a nobod', non non!"

"Well, but it's a sure cinch they were on the lookout for us, or the thing wouldn't have been pulled off so slick. They must have been onto the game for fair, however they got there. Why, here was Murphy at the foot of the stairs, Finnegan almost right at your keyhole, and I myself in the alley under your window; yet this slick gazabo scoots in, bangs the bomb and slides to cover without any trouble. The thing is impossible. It's impossible any way you look at it. Now—"

The detective's puzzled gaze happened at this moment to light upon Murphy, who was poking around in a closet with his night-stick, and a gleam of surprised intelligence shot into his face. He paused abruptly in his speech and stood considering. Then he looked at his watch. "I'll leave this to you, Murphy for the present," he said, finally. "You know what to do, and I'll see you later. I am due somewhere else now." And he went out.

"Dr. Furnivall," said Detective Birsch, "here is something that will interest you, or I am mightily mistaken."

He passed a letter to the celebrated psychologist as he spoke, his thin, clean-shaven face flushed with eagerness. Dr. Furnivall, sitting back in his chair, glanced at his visitor, and, taking the dirty sheet of paper, read slowly aloud:

"'Tony, you gotta four thous-a dollar wat we gotta get from you Wednesday, sure. We donna wan no foolin'. We need-a da mon bad, an' gotta get it by this-a time Wednesda' da 10 July, or we kill-a you. We kill-a da boy firs' an' da wom'. Thursda' we kill-a da boy if we donna gotta da mon Wednesda'. You sen in letter to Jon Kilbraith, General Delivery, San Francisco, Calif. We mean-a da biz now, an' we donna wan no chin about da mat. You sen da mon or we kill-a sure.'"

Heading the sheet were a rudely drawn black hand and coffin. Dr. Furnivall regarded it in silence for some seconds after finishing the reading. Then he examined the detective through his colored spectacles.

"Well?" he asked.

Detective Birsch leaned forward in his chair.

"A week ago yesterday," he said, speaking rapidly and in a low voice, as if fearing possible listeners, "Tony Macaluso, the barber, brought this letter to our station. He had just received it by mail. It seems he has saved up $4,000 to put his son, who graduated from the Latin school last month, through a college in Rome and make a priest of him. Now, the strange thing is that nobody but Tony and his wife knows he has this money, not even the boy, for they intended it for a surprise for him on his birthday, which comes next week. They have lived so poorly in order to scrape the stuff together that they are supposed to be about down and out. So it's a puzzle from the start who could write that letter. We told Tony to hold his grip on the cash, and we would see him through. First we sent a dummy letter to the San Francisco general delivery, and then notified the police there to look out for it. At this end of the line we could do no more till yesterday, Thursday, because nothing was threatened against the boy until then. We kept the whole family covered all day, and last night I hid myself under the fire-escape, within eight feet of Tony's windows; another man, Murphy, sneaked around in the lower hall, where he could see everybody that went over the stairs, and still another man, Finnegan, laid on the landing almost right at Tony's door. Just the same, at two o'clock this morning, nobody being seen going in, we all heard an explosion, which turned out to have been in Tony's room. Finnegan heard a door open and shut right on top of the explosion, saw a man jump out of Tony's rooms, and heard him running down the stairs towards the front door, where Murphy was posted, and out goes Finnegan from the hall window, dropping right in front of the door. There stands Murphy, rubbering it up the stairs, because he heard some noises. But when Finnegan asks him for his man he swears he has seen nobody!"

The detective paused and looked suggestively at Dr. Furnivall, who smiled delightedly.

"Go on," he said.

"We hiked it for all we were worth for Tony's, and found him praying on the floor, and the boy with a gash a foot long, more or less, in his face, his mother holding him up in bed, and scattered all round were marks of a bomb good and plenty. The boy was hurt so that he was only half taking notice, but he was leaking grit, just the same, and managed to tell me all he knew, which wasn't much. He said that he woke up in the night and saw a person on the fire-escape outside his window, and when he asked who was there something struck him in the head, and he fell out of bed unconscious. Tony and the old woman heard the sound of feet running across the boy's floor, heard the door open and shut and the feet go pattering down the stairs—just as Finnegan says. And Murphy swears nobody came down."

He paused again, regarding Dr. Furnivall earnestly, and again his listener smiled delightedly, but said nothing.

"Now," Birsch continued, "the second strange thing, or a bunch of strange things, is that the boy's window was shut and fastened, the person he saw was outside of it, the bomb that person threw struck the boy without breaking the glass, and without the sash being raised, and the mother and father heard somebody cross the room, open the door, shut it, and skip downstairs. Finnegan saw this somebody, heard the door open and shut, and saw and heard the person going down the stairs, but Murphy at the foot of these stairs sees nothing of any person of the kind!"

For the third time the detective paused meaningly. Dr. Furnivall laughed and stroked his beard.

"I see," he said. "Murphy let the bomb-man in and out. That's why he didn't see him!"

The detective appeared gratified at this evidence of perspicacity on Dr. Furnivall's part. But only for a moment. Then he searched the bearded face with his eyes. He did not like the tone of that laugh.

"There's no other way out of it—" he began.

"I could give you six different ways out of it," the doctor interrupted. "But the one in which it really happened will do. I suppose you have come to ask me to hypnotize Murphy and extract the truth from him—is that it?"

The detective flushed and gnawed his lip.

"Yes," he answered, shortly.

Dr. Furnivall rang for a maid, and scribbling a note, passed it to her.

"Read that aloud—all but the address," he said.

"'If you will come with the bearer of this note,' the maid read, '"to my office, you may save yourself some trouble, and the humiliation of being taken to the police station, instead of here. Dr. Furnivall.'"

The doctor looked at the detective, whose face was blank, and then said to the maid:

"Explain that to Mike and let him deliver it. Tell him to hurry. Now," he continued briskly to the detective, "you shall see the culprit and hear his confession. I have no time to waste over this affair, and while we are waiting we will improve the moments by indulging in a word or two of psychology. In the first place, you should know that the proper method of beginning the search for the perpetrator of a crime is to learn all the facts that you possibly can, and then understand that you almost certainly have not learned them all, and particularly the most necessary ones. Then, making large allowances for what you don't know, you should round up the person concerned whose character fits snuggest into all the circumstances and question him. The usual method is to get a few facts and then go at the job without the slightest regard for the character of the individuals involved, neglecting to allow for the facts that are unknown. In this way always some innocent person becomes the first suspect. In this particular case you say there is only one way in which this peculiar assault and still more peculiar escape could have happened. That is one of the things you don't know, and for which you have made no allowance in your deductions. Suppose, for example, that a criminal, after starting down the stairs, and seeing or hearing Murphy there at the foot, hurried back again and up the higher flight? Finnegan had dropped to the street, and he could easily have done so, making his escape by way of the roof—"

Detective Birsch made an involuntary movement of chagrin.

"You see," smiled Dr. Furnivall, "you had your idea, the first that came to you, so firmly fixed in your mind, jumped to the belief in Murphy's guilt so quickly, not seeing any other way, and were so incapable of entertaining any other idea that you really could not recognize this other way out though it so openly confronted you. Then you never dreamed of considering the characters of the several persons concerned. There were three people in that tenement, any one of whom could, as far as physical possibilities go, have done the act, and it seems as if nobody else could. Not another soul was near. The first question you should have put to yourself is, which one of these three has the character in which lurks the possibility of throwing that bomb. Let us in fact begin the inquiry now. You have seen them all, while I never even heard of any of them before. Now tell me if you think the boy could be guilty?"

"Him? Hardly," the detective grunted. "He wouldn't be likely to bust his own face all up. Besides, the money was for him, anyway. It would be only stealing from himself, for he'd have it in a day or two. And on top of that, he didn't even know that his father had the stuff, and was all broke up because he couldn't go to college and be a priest."

"Very good," smiled the doctor. "Facts, facts, facts, and never a word of character! I fear you are incorrigible. However, so much for the boy—he's obliterated. Now, how about Tony? Did he really wish the boy to have all that money? Could he afford to let him take it? Did you inquire into his business, in order to find if he happened to be desperately pressed for money just now, as most men are sometimes?"

Birsch appeared uncomfortable.

"Why, anyway," the detective exclaimed, "it was Tony himself who brought us the Black Hand letter and told us about it, asking us to send men to protect him. He wouldn't do that, would he, if he had this thing up his sleeve? Besides, he's scared blue. I never saw anybody before frightened clean in to his marrow, the way he was last night. He hasn't the brains, or the spunk, either, to fix up such a plant and get up at two o'clock in the morning and throw a bomb into his own son's room. Bosh! The notion is ridiculous." The detective sniffed in contempt.

"Well, you are improving," the doctor grinned. "You do finally glance, if ever so slightly, at character in this instance. And you put Tony out of it. Now we have left only the mother." The doctor proceeded imperturbably in the face of his listener's look of incredulity and downright disgust. "Had the mother any reason, could she have any reason for doing such a thing, and if so, has she the qualities necessary to the carrying out of so bold a plan?"

"I don't see what you're getting at," growled Birsch, "and it don't seem to me there's any sense in this kind of business, guessing at all these things, and wondering which one of 'em done it. None of 'em done it. Somebody else done it, and if you know who it is, which I doubt, tell me, and I'll go and nab him."

"Now," the doctor continued, as if the other had remained dumb, "you have practically eliminated the three who were the only persons in a position, physically speaking, to do this thing, and that settles the matter, with you, as far as they are concerned. You would take your oath, wouldn't you, that neither one of these persons is, or reasonably could be, the culprit?"

"Yes," he replied, shortly. "Keep up your jollying if it does you any good, but I'd go my oath on these people, just the same, and I guess you would yourself. It ain't in any sort of reason that one of them done it. It was the man outside on the fire-escape, and that skipped downstairs, or up, and that Finnegan and Murphy and Tony and the old woman heard, and that Finnegan saw as well as heard."

"Then the ramifications of the problem must be, to you, how did this man reach the fire-escape without your knowledge, you being right under it; how did he enter the room without raising the window or breaking it; how did he escape so miraculously; and what did he enter the room at all for? For he could have thrown the bomb through the glass, you know, and it would have been both safer for him and more within reason."

Birsch set his lips and for a moment said nothing. Finally he burst forth:

"Seems to me you ain't helping anything great! In a minute you'll make it out that nobody could do it, and that consequently it wasn't done!"

"I am only showing you, so far, my friend, what your method amounts to," said the doctor. "By it I can prove or disprove anything under the sun, because it has to do with appearances, instead of character, with the superficials as distinguished from the realities. I can even turn completely around and prove to you, by your method, that each one of these persons whom we have, by my method, proved innocent, is the only person who could have committed the crime. What you lack is—psychology." Dr. Furnivall did not wish to say "brains," nor "learning," nor "intelligence," nor even "training," so, after some hesitation, he said "psychology." And he continued: "Now, the moment I saw this letter and heard the story, I knew indubitably the guilty party."

"The—the nation you did!" burst forth the detective, involuntarily.

"The easiest thing in the world," smiled the doctor. "Just consider this letter—was it written by an educated or an uneducated person?"

"Why, uneducated, of course," returned Birsch. "See the spelling, and the language. Or else it was an educated person trying to seem uneducated."

"I fancy it was one or the other," he said, "but which?"

"How do I know?" responded Birsch, fatuously. The doctor smoothed his features and answered, mildly:

"That is where, psychology—yes, psychology—gives me the advantage of you. Would an uneducated Italian, such as apparently wrote this letter, spell 'Wednesday' with a 'd' invariably in the first syllable, once with a 'y', as if to let the reader know that he really knew how to spell it, and then write it twice without the 'y,' as well as to leave the same letter out of 'Thursday?' Would an uneducated Italian spell 'thousand' with a dash, 'thous-a,' would he write 'need-a' for 'need,' or 'kil-a' for kill, and so on? He would speak this way, but he would require some education in order to write this way. Moreover, the punctuation and use of capitals are perfect—two positive proofs of a certain degree of education. And to clinch the evidence, look at the handwriting. It is disguised, but irregularly, as if done by an immature mind, and the vertical penmanship taught a little while ago in our public schools sticks out all through the letter. The character and attainments of the writer of this letter, taken together with the injured boy's testimony, points with finality to a certain one of the persons known to be concerned. In short, whatever his motive may be, and impossible as the known facts alone seem to render it—"

The doctor paused as footsteps sounded without, and then went on—"the person who threw that bomb was—"

"Master Frank Macalusco," announced the maid, opening the door. And forward stepped the son of Tony, his face bandaged, but wearing a smile of deprecating good humor.

Detective Birsch stared at the boy and then looked at the doctor.

"You don't mean—" he began, and paused. Dr. Furnivall smiled somewhat grimly.

"Take a seat, Master Frank," he said. And when the grinning youth had taken a tentative position on the edge of the couch, hat in hand, the doctor continued: "Shall I be compelled to hypnotize you, or will you tell your story freely?"

"Oh, it's all off now, and I might as well talk," the boy answered. Far from feeling embarrassed, he seemed to enjoy the situation, grinning impartially at each of his hearers as he proceeded with his confession. "You can take it straight," he said, in schoolboy slang, "that it wasn't me for the priesthood. It was my folks that put up that job for me. It is me for the stage—I'm going to be an actor. It wouldn't do to let my father know that, though—he'd go nutty. He thought it was all settled long ago, and I let him think so because it would be no good to start in fighting him before I had to. Of course I knew he had the money saved up. How could I help getting wise to it, when they're always whispering about it to each other, looking mysterious and acting funny, me right there with 'em so much? So I fixed up this deal to lift the money from father. I wouldn't use it—all I wanted was to make sure he wouldn't send me to college. I could not do that this way without making him mad at me for not doing as he wished, and I could give the stuff back to him later. I knew he was easily frightened, and thought he would give up right off as soon as I was threatened, without going to the police, but when I heard him in the other room talking with mother about the letter and the trap the police had set I didn't know what to do. At first I thought I'd call it all off. It was too risky. But the excitement sort of appealed to me, and I thought that as I was bound to be an actor, this was as good a time as any to begin. So finally I hit on the thing I did. Last night I got an old piece of lead pipe and split it, to make it look like an exploded bomb, and put it on the rug, which I scorched with a match, cut my face a little with my razor, and then touched off a cannon firecracker. I had no gun, you know, and these things wouldn't tell any tales. I had my door already unlocked, and ran and opened it, and slammed it back without latching it, jumped a few steps downstairs, and then ran back again, closing the door softly. I had meant to unlock my window, to make believe the Black Hand got in that way, but I guess I was a little nervous, and I forgot it, and so had to say the man I saw was on the fire-escape outside, instead of in the room, as I had intended to say. The situation was impossible, wasn't it? It was funny the way everybody swallowed such a stiff as that!" He threw the chagrined detective a sly glance. He was the "everybody" referred to. Then the boy, this would-be actor, thrilling with a pride over his exploit that not even its detection and failure could materially lower, added: "I told father in the letter to send the money to the San Francisco post office, then I wrote to them there to forward any letters for John Kilbraith to another post office, and I wrote that office to forward the mail to another, and so on, and the last one was to forward it to our general delivery here, where I could get it."

THEY ENTERED WITHOUT CEREMONY ON THE SCENE OF WILD LAMENTATION

Prof. Rogers—Have you Ibsen's plays? Fair young librarian—No, sir, but we have Ibsen's works.—Harper's Weekly.